

Greaser's Palace Subverting the western

by Chuck Kleinhans

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In the last decade a new controversy has begun over the question of form and content in radical film.⁽¹⁾ One aspect of this debate has involved the question of how “subversive” some commercial, feature length films are or may be.⁽²⁾ In the following analysis, I will consider Robert Downey’s GREASER’S PALACE (1973) as possibly a film in which the form subverts the content and thereby presents a political statement.

In brief, GREASER’S PALACE is a parody of the Western genre, interweaving three main story lines. The first is of Seaweedhead Greaser, a hardboiled owner of the saloon “Greaser’s Palace” who has two main problems—constipation and an obstreperous son who repeatedly returns after being killed. The second is that of a nameless frontier woman, survivor of the brutal murder of her husband and son, who struggles on through the wilderness despite continual wounding. The third is that of Jesse, a Christ figure. As a parody of the western, GREASER’S PALACE implicitly sets up a straw category: the conventional or stereotyped western. Of course, there is no perfect conventional western in existence, but it does exist as a category of thought. Downey as director-writer can rely heavily on the audience’s explicit or implicit awareness of the codes and conventions which make up the traditional western.

Most obviously, Downey reverses the western’s character types. Seaweedhead Greaser parodies the usual saloon owner who stands for a businessman’s stability. Like the western’s big rancher, he has the most power and potential to be abusive or beneficent in using it. Greaser acts totally capriciously and is in no way a center of stability. He both consoles his daughter and shoots his son. His arbitrary violence contrasts with his “jolly old codger” demeanor at other times. In a reflective mood he confides to his young companion Coco, “I wish I

could put my arms around each and every one of them and let them know everything's goin' ta be OK." Coco: "Why doncha, Sea?" "I'm not bizarre enough." After having murdered his son (nicknamed Lamy Homo) several times, he feels a Ben Cartwright-like expansion of feeling and effects a reconciliation with the young man: "Lamy, you're not a Homo, you're a Greaser." And father and son foxtrot together.

In Downey's parody the western's cowboy hero becomes zoot-suited Jesse. Jesse matches some of the characteristics of the usual heroic formula. He is homeless, independent, young, a brotherly person, trustful, helpful, resourceful, a stranger when he arrives and loved by all when he leaves. However, rather than riding a horse he rides a donkey, which fits his Christ role. Similarly, rather than a ten gallon hat, he wears a wide-brimmed, cerise, pork pie hat which resembles a halo, particularly in one extreme wide-angle shot particularly close-up.

Some of Jesse's characteristics run counter to those of the western hero, though. He is not asexual, for when tempted he succumbs: first to Mr. Spitunia, a gay midget, and later to Greaser's daughter, Cholera ("I didn't wear any panties, I hope you don't mind."). While the western hero usually has to effect some kind of reconciliation through avenging wrong, Jesse's role as Christ figure is to reconcile people to people and humans to God, something he fails to do within the film. Jesse is a parody of Christ as well. As healer he performs a few miracles. He rubs his hands together and says, "If you feel, you heal," then lays them on the deceased Lamy to bring him back to life. When hailed as "Messiah" by a man on crutches, he performs the same act. The old fellow casts away his crutches, falters a few steps forward, and falls into the dust. The cripple then crawls forward, exclaiming, "I can crawl again. I can crawl again" When called on to cure an Indian with a backache, Jesse accomplishes the remedy with a few chiropractic throws.

Downey most significantly changes the stereotype by strongly contrasting the traditional western hero's destiny with that of Christ. While the convention may show the hero's actions as serious, as enacting the dream of glory or triumph, the western never crosses into the area of a truly tragic destiny. Of course, Jesse, as Christ, does have a tragic destiny. Thus the film deepens the western by explicitly making the hero a Christ-figure, and it simultaneously diminishes the Christ story through parody and ending with Good Friday, not Easter. Jesse's death is de-signified: his blood does not wash humanity's sins, but remains merely another stain on the floor of Greaser's Palace.

The conventional comic member of the heavy's gang in Downey's film becomes the preposterous boaster Vernon, who relates anecdotes which get no reaction from his hearers, largely because of their pointless grossness:

"Seaweedhead, tomorrow night I'm goin' ta get me a horse,

‘n ride up to Four Corners and see Red Snapper. I know she’s waitin’ for me, ‘cause ten minutes ago she sent me the finest smoke signal I ever seen. She said, ‘Vern, you are the only man who ever made my bell ring. All my love, Red Snapper. P.S. Up-the-old-hidey-ho says hello.’”

All the other characters also invert western stereotypes. Neither a savage nor a noble savage, the Indian is a dope-smoking head who has a masochistic fetish for beating himself with a woman’s boot. The traditional happily married older frontier couple turn into the Spitunias, a pair of gay males. When Jesse stops at their cabin seeking something to eat, Mr. Spitunia invites him in, but Mrs. Spitunia is abusive, “I have vanilla grits and get the hell out of here if you know what’s good for you” Mr. Spitunia apologizes for the insult by confiding, “She has a very nice clit.”

By parodying character stereotypes through inversion, Downey does not so much directly contradict the established type as shift to a different key or register. He does not change Greaser from heavy into soft sentimentalist, but presents him as sometimes inexplicably maudlin. Rather than the film’s presenting Jesse as cowboy hero or anti-hero, Jesse is totally ineffectual at doing anything. Similarly, Vernon does not provide light comic relief, but an awkwardness in the narrative, funny in its inappropriateness. The Spitunias provide a similar displacement. Thus through a shifting of conventional codes or signifiers, Downey effects a comic change in the film from its beginning to end.

Downey’s film opens unsurprisingly, with a close up of wagon wheels pulling through sand, which then cuts to an extreme long shot of a small covered wagon atop a sand dune at dusk, in picture postcard style. The scene then shifts to an establishing shot of Greaser’s Palace, a multi-story wooden structure. The camera moves inside as the music of a woman singing a sad slow ballad increases in volume. Inside we find the proprietor enjoying his daughter’s performance. As the song continues, the camera isolates the deadpan and vacant faces of the clientele. With harmonica and harmonium accompaniment, Jack Nietzsche’s song for Cholera Greaser manages to be a piece of errant nonsense in itself while parodying the traditional western saloon singer’s song which has the worldly (and unrepentant) vocalist assume the persona of a woman chastened to virtue through bitter experience.

“You can see so few like me
Remain unsoiled and pure.
By virtue sacked, I am intact
Unsoiled by passions pure.”

The nice piling on of contradictions continues throughout the refrain:

“Save your sowers [sorrows] for tomorrow,

You never know what's apt to go,
through a tender maiden's head.
So save your sowers for tomorrow,
Many men have felt the ruin of a heart that's dead."

Cholera's advice for her all-male audience is,

"It won't be hard, if you're on guard,
And always salt your pork."

While Cholera continues, in the middle of her second refrain, her stupefied audience awakes to excitement when a figure wearing a sheet (the Holy Ghost, we later discover) butts out his cigar on Lamy's chest. Lamy's screams result in his being dragged out, pushed down, beaten with hats, and otherwise abused until his father arrives. The elder Greaser tells Lamy to get going, despite the son's protests of innocence. When he finally moves off, Greaser calls him back with a cheerful, "Lamy Homo!" But no sooner does Lamy return for parental reconciliation than Greaser, in perfect cinematic ultraviolence style, shoots his son twice in the belly. No explanation is given as the body is carried off.

With the gunshots virtually still ringing in our ears, the scene cuts back to the wagon. As it approaches we see a pioneer family: father, mother and child. The wagon moves away, down a lush green meadow between hills, with mountains further off, reminiscent of John Ford's western landscapes with a stagecoach or wagon far in the distance. As the camera holds on the distant wagon, a parachutist descends into the middle ground.

These opening sequences establish Downey's parody style in GREASER'S PALACE. Blatant reversal of audience expectation are keys to Downey's method here. He does this through anachronism (the parachutist), through isolation of a technique (ultraviolence) to strip it of its usual function (in this case, catharsis), and through nonsense (the song). He systematically undermines almost every convention of the Western. In the end, he succeeds in creating a film that totally critiques not only the genre, but the audience's reaction to the genre. After seeing GREASER'S PALACE it is harder to have a naive response to one of Ford's landscape shots or to the visual clichés in any western. "Where's the parachutist?" might be a question in the back of one's mind.

Perhaps that seems to be putting it too strongly, but Downey is so persistent in this film that he does not merely amuse but overinflates and bursts conventions. In Downey's hands the western, like Humpty Dumpty, can't be put together again. When Downey takes up the currently fashionable ultraviolence technique, he does so not for any narrative reason (which must be minimally granted, say, Sergio Leone), for Downey's violence is random and unexplained. Nor does he bring

violence to some allegorical or thematic level as it is used in EL TOPO, CLOCKWORK ORANGE, DELIVERANCE, or STRAW DOGS. Rather, Downey simply inserts it as a loud punctuation mark. No motivation given, none surmisable. The killing of Lamy is, or becomes, a running joke—for he always returns, with the same wondrous tale of how he was swimming in a rainbow of naked babies and then changed into a Perfect Smile.

In parodying the western, GREASER'S PALACE also satirizes the genre by being critical of the way its conventions function. The clichéd “moral song” of the prostitute-singer-with-a-heart-of-gold neither fits the world of the traditional western, nor the world of GREASER'S PALACE, much less our world. Thus the Palace audience's catatonic stupor is a criticism of art. GREASER'S PALACE is not only a criticism of art, but at times a criticism of life as well, attaining the province of true satire, as seen in a running joke in the Greaser story sequences. Vernon, one of the Palace gang, is a seedy loudmouth boaster, who from time to time when Greaser and crew are looking off at the horizon confides a “true” sexual adventure to the boss. Greaser remains frozen and deadpan through each one, and then shows no reaction whatsoever, providing a second laugh after the initial laugh at Vernon's outrageous boast.

“Last night I called on that German woman in Los Alamos. Round about midnight, I put my nose to her cunny and rubbed it back and forth, back and forth, up and down, back and forth. She was fickle. When she was sleeping, I pulled out my John Thomas and did the deed. She woke up screaming ... [etc].”

The parody, on one level, is of the stereotyped comic sidekick always full of clownish wit or folk wisdom, such as Gabby Hayes (that cowpoke descendent of Sancho Panza), and the stereotyped hanger-on, whose main cinematic purpose in the westerns seems to be providing filler dialogue and being an extra body for gunfights. But Vernon functions on another level as well, reflecting on everyday life. The workplace and locker room sexploit braggart is a familiar enough entity that the figure of Vernon reflects on men's mundane braggadocio as well. Greaser's deadpan response serves to undermine both the cinematic sidekick/hanger-on figure and the real world's macho boaster as well.

Through parodying the western's formal conventions, Downey alters the western's content. Through the change wrought, he both directly and, as is more often the case, indirectly, criticizes society. But, we might argue, all comic westerns do that—at least a western parody such as Eliot Silverstein's CAT BALLOU or Mel Brooks' BLAZING SADDLES. Actually, GREASER'S PALACE works on a qualitatively different plane than the comic western, which merely diminishes the standard associations invoked by the mainstream formula. In the comic western,

for example, the villain, instead of being a threat to the hero and society, is only a threat to himself and in a fast-draw shoots his toe instead of the marshal. Similarly while CAT BALLOU and BLAZING SADDLES play with the conventional western, they do not perform the basic subversion of the genre which GREASER'S PALACE accomplishes. The use of additional devices and techniques besides simple parody makes Downey's critique not merely comic but acid as well.

Downey's broken narrative (the three story lines interwoven) is not truly an anti-narrative device, for it is a familiar enough technique today even in the conventional western. However, the director does employ a whole constellation of devices which together make GREASER'S PALACE a strongly anti-narrative film. For example, Downey uses a very deliberate slow pacing unusual for comedy, and he heavily relies on visual rather than oral statement. While many traditional westerns, a typical Boetticher, say, do have long sequences of little or no dialogue, narrative is sustained by camera movement or movement within the frame. In contrast, Downey celebrates stasis, as in the early sequence of the Palace customers. Even in movie shots, Downey uses repetition (which is a multiplication of stasis for the same end on a more sophisticated level). Thus, there is a 45-second tracking shot of Greaser and crew walking with a member of the gang repeatedly picking a card from a deck and asking Greaser if it's "that one?" or "that one?" (of course it never is). In fact, this particular sequence has absolutely no traditional narrative function. The zany card shark/magician is funny, but Greaser's walk goes nowhere, and the next time we see him he is back at the Palace with no explanation of the walk, in violation of elementary filmmaking rules. The scene functions then, simply as a piece of joke material, wandering off at a tangent to the minimal narrative present. But, by *not* being a contribution to the narrative, it also functions as a comment on narrative and the uses of narrative.

Similarly, Downey and his director of photography, Peter Powell, frequently use virtuoso camera and lens work to interrupt the narrative flow and distance the audience from the action by our sheer admiration for the photographic technique. Such a sequence begins with the camera on Greaser asleep in the saloon. Off camera we hear an unrealistically loud sound of boots running up the long front steps and bursting into the saloon, "Lamy Homo's back in town." Greaser and crew get up and go out. As they emerge outside, an amazing wide-angle tracking shot begins, with the camera moving steadily at about a 45-degree angle from Greaser's line of sight, keeping Greaser centered in the frame as the gang rapidly walks. The only sound is the overly loud jangle of spurs and boots as the shot continues for about 45 seconds. There is a very brief cut to Jesse and Lamy entering town on a donkey, and then cut back to the same tracking shot at the same point that it ended. Another 20 seconds of the tracking shot, then a cut to the donkey and passengers, and then an extremely long telephoto shot of Greaser and gang from

Jesse and Lamy's point of view. This shot lasts 50 seconds and keeps the approaching group far in the bottom of the frame, cut off at about their waists. As they approach, they must walk down a road containing donkeys, which comically underlines the use of the telephoto lens. That is, they seemingly are striding through an endless herd of donkeys according to the lens' way of seeing things, whereas to a normal lens they would appear to be walking down a road on which there were a few animals. The shot ends with Greaser reaching out at the camera/Lamy.

One cannot help but notice the use of lenses in such a sequence. Thus the camera work implicitly gives the message, "This is a photographed image." The heightened emphasis on technique, both sound and camera, plays off against the seeming slowness of the same action (walking). The sequence takes about two minutes and is an intrusive technical and stylistic comment on transition shots in narrative film. In fact, it probably would take two minutes or more of elapsed time to walk at a fast pace from the front door of the Palace set to the donkey. But having the screen time nearly match the elapsed time makes the sequence seem very long indeed. Of course, Downey's main purpose here is to make us laugh at the incongruity produced by breaking a convention (transition shots should be short). Downey breaks another convention as well, that long tracking shots must be varied in composition, for here the content of the frame remains basically the same throughout the shot. Similar humor gained through camera work is seen when Jesse (who is an aspiring singer-dancer) meets his agent, Morris (an anachronistic joke on the leading actors' agent, the William Morris Agency). Using an extreme wide angle lens, the camera remains in a steady extreme close up of Morris, who wears a spaceman's bubble helmet, grotesquely distorted by the lens and distance. At the end of this long shot, the camera switches to Jesse, making the brim of his hat dramatically warp and seem a halo. Also in this category of camera work are two sunset shots. The first takes only a few seconds, producing a very rapid sunset indeed, apparently through closing down the diaphragm. The second is the picture's closing shot and takes about a minute and 40 seconds during which nothing happens but the sun setting. In both cases the variation from the expected cinematic norm undercuts the stereotyped romanticism of sunset shots.

Particularly characteristic of GREASER'S PALACE are its distinct effects: distancing the audience from audience from the action, a strong anti-conventionality, and farcical humor. Each of these can be found in other films, but distinctive in Downey's work is the fusion of them where each contributes to the other. This interdependence of farce, anti-conventionality, and distancing can be analyzed most clearly in the story line of the frontier woman. The western convention establishes a base sympathy for the wife-mother figure whether she is marginal or central to the story. Thus our initial conventional reaction to her first appearance is sympathetic. Yet Downey offers us no psychological

understanding of the woman. We never get close to her. He gives her no lines, so we can only surmise her character from her physical actions. During a brief campfire scene before the murder of her husband and son, the husband explains why they are traveling. It's not to establish a homestead, but rather to give the wife a chance to audition for Greaser and break into show business. If it doesn't work out, he adds philosophically, they'll go back and

“buy a homestead and settle down, and maybe you'll be happy because once you had the chance to sing for Señor Greaser.”

This provides a slight modification of our initial sentiment, for it runs against the grain of social convention depicted in the western: careerist wives and understanding husbands are alien to the genre. This is one element of distancing. The most important element, however, is that Downey restricts the audience's understanding of the woman because he limits the range of actions allowed to that character. While the frontier wife shows emotion upon discovery of the murders, such as horror and distraction and apprehension, she does not use the most stereotyped expression, such as tears and facial anguish and pain, thus preventing the audience's most elementary level of identification. Essentially Downey presents her without any context. Actually the visual context runs counter to the action. The murder takes place in the most Edenic of settings—an open forest with lush young grass. When she sits quietly and contemplatively beside a pond, the woman is shot in the chest, in an act of completely unexpected and arbitrary, random violence. This random violence has been prepared for as a “distanced” effect by the previous unexplained murder of her family and the surprising and equally unexplained violence of Greaser to Lamy. GREASER'S PALACE offers no explanation or hint of the cause of the violence inflicted on the woman, nor does it offer any psychological explanation or context of how the woman feels about her being shot.

Even cinematic Grand Guignol (e.g., WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?) offers some motivation such as madness. Downey, in contrast, does not. Sufficiently distanced from the action and insulated from the character's pain, we do not feel anxiety, even in moments of great suspense. The woman is shown, after being shot in the chest and arm and having crawled through the desert, lying, sunburned and covered with sand. With a great effort, fighting the pain of her wounded arm, slowly and agonizingly she reaches to extract an arrow from her thigh, accomplishes its removal, and collapses exhausted. A second arrow lands in the wound and the audience laughs. And one can laugh precisely because of the sudden reversal of expectation, the assault on the stereotyped reaction to such a scene. Black humor, cynical humor, but a laughter that accomplishes the maintenance of distance in our own experience of the screen action. It is then a protective laughter, as Freud

described gallows humor. In GREASER'S PALACE the preconditions for audience distance are established in large part through anti-convention devices which eliminate any psychological ground from the stark figure. The audience manifests this distance in turn through the instant and unreflective laughter of farce.

British film critic Thomas Elsaesser has offered an important consideration of distancing in film.

“Recognition in the cinema ... can take a variety of forms: recognition of stereotypes, clichés, genre-conventions, iconography; recognition of plot situations or typical drive-patterns; recognition of the actors and stars; recognition of other movies; recognition of the director's style and themes - all of which in their different ways and on different levels of intellectual sophistication create a matrix of expectations and anticipatory projections ... The matrix of expectations can be frustrated ... or it can be manipulated, either by “managing” it through gratification (amplification, orchestration, dynamisation) or—in order to shift the level of participation from the emotional to the intellectual level—through postponed gratification by means of distancing, irony, reversal, counterpoint, or stylistic elaboration.”(3)

Downey constantly assaults the “matrix of expectations” of the conventional western. Instead of amplifying the recognition, he undercuts it and manipulates particular western forms. For example, Jim Kitses points out one of the western's particular “icons” is the church.

“To see a church in a movie—any film but a western—is to see a church; the camera records ... But a church in a western has a priori a potential expressiveness rooted in the accretions of the past ... it embodies the spirit of pioneer America.”(4)

When Downey shows a church, it is an abandoned and empty one, visited by God the Father, where He meets the Holy Ghost who complains,

“You don't know what I can do because you never give me a chance.”

The church, instead of being orchestrated into a meaningful representation of the pioneer spirit in the untamed land, stands for nothing in particular at all except an empty space. Downey has, in effect, undercut the iconic meaning of the church in the western.

GREASER'S PALACE does not simply manipulate isolated elements, but

it also presents a complex matrix of reversals. Thus it upsets the usual constellation of expectations which develop from the conventional western. For example, one of the expectations of the western is that the social norms portrayed should be close to or parallel to those of the audience's everyday life. Through the humor of paradox, Downey deliberately manipulates such an expectation. He also reverses the usual manner of building suspense. As we saw with the frontier woman, the easiest way to build suspense is to employ an empathetic audience response, but throughout the film Downey deliberately eliminates anxiety for the character and identification with the character. One has neither emotional or cognitive concern for the implications of events for the characters. Thus GREASER'S PALACE is on the surface not reflective but simply carries the audience along on the most simple level of narrative response: following the story. However by undercutting conventions through formal changes on the stereotyped western content, the film *becomes* reflective in a highly intellectual way. For example, for all its aggression and violence, the film is safely insulated in an acceptable (comic) form: the shootings are clearly laughable. However, on a more intellectual level, violence is indeed commented on. The audience is constantly called onto make such comparisons throughout the film (which explains on reason for the slow pacing; it allows such reflection).

Downey also violates the conventional scheme of probability of a narrative fiction, that it vaguely be within the expectations of "life." In GREASER'S PALACE we find anachronism everywhere: parachutists and a saloon crowd which resembles hippies in western garb more than westerners. The Indians are a bizarre mixture of "authentic" Indians and young women who look as though they were cast from a rock concert audience, and even a woman in a Hawaiian grass skirt (all noble savages are interchangeable). Similarly, Downey manipulates all residual expectations from the formula only for the end of laughter: both the Christ story and the western conventions are diminished severely.

By this near total reduction to absurdity, GREASER'S PALACE implies the hidden message of all farce. It's that people, whatever their pretensions to a higher life, are inevitably creatures of animal instincts and needs. This discrete message is underlined by the conclusion, which in contrast to conventional endings, has no social or psychological importance. Rather the ending is perfunctory and intends no satisfaction. Jesse is crucified, and Greaser overcomes his constipation. As the Palace crowd celebrates Greaser's victory over his bowels, the Palace blows up. More precisely, the sequence of events is Cholera and Jesse's orgasmic union followed by Greaser's final defecating. The following sequences remove any climactic implications. The Palace explodes, but we see Greaser again, visiting his Indian friend. Jesse, the Holy Ghost, and God the Father meet and Jesse says he can't do the crucifixion bit. "I think I've found myself, and really don't trust you."

The answer is curt, “You get moving.” Jesse then heals the suffering woman, who in turn nails him to the cross and is rewarded by being reunited with her family. The death of Jesse is counterpointed by the family reunion. But by this time, our only reaction can be an ironic distance from its inherent sentimentality. Then God walks off, over a sand dune, and the sun sets for one minute and 40 seconds. At this point in the film’s progress, the conclusion is completely perfunctory. By using the most stereotyped closure (ironically underlined with electronic noise after the sun begins to set to romantic music) Downey simply enforces a perverse arbitrariness on the material, and he inverts the traditional symbolism by giving no indication of Easter, but rather a sunset.

The subversion of convention early in the film is largely effected by surprise through simple reversal. Later the film in its zany progress has constructed its own frame of understanding. A case in point occurs early in the film as the locals file into Greaser’s to pay their taxes. (As the big boss he exploits them directly, rather than indirectly as the convention has it.) The fourth taxpayer pays and breaks into an unaccompanied (and unasked for) song:

“Amber mountain, Navaho guns nearby
A white cloud is floating
Over this land of enchantment
Under turquoise skies.
I hear distant drums, I hear roaring guns.
I hear Indians, I hear a war cry.
For soldiers in blue, I hear bugles,
Under turquoise skies.”

The Burl-Ives-type singing cowboy is shot for his efforts. After a number of such simple reversals of expectation, the film construct an inverted world. In the context of upside-down expectations we begin to learn some general things about the characters. We see that Jesse is really too naive to deal with humanity; that he is an ineffective Christ. When he astonishes the multitudes by walking on water, he can't resist adding a forward handspring and diving in after he takes his bows. When he finally delivers his sermon on the mount, it is as engaging as he is, but absolutely ineffectual for his auditors.

“Exactly six miles north of Skag mountain, in the Valley of Pain, there lives an evil devil-monster. His name is Bingo-Gasstation-Motel-Cheeseburger-with-a-side-of-aircraft-noise-and- you'll-be-Gary-Indiana, and he *loves* to hurt people. The last time I saw Bingo-Gasstation-Motel - Cheeseburger-with-a-side-of-aircraft-noise-and-you'll-be-Gary-Indiana, he told me what he wants to do. He wants to come down here, and *kill* each and every one of you, but I

said to him, “Bingo, wait a minute.” And the reason I said that is because I believe in you people. I believe you can do the job. I believe you can help each other. I believe you can make this world a better place to live in. That’s it.”

At other times Jesse doesn't seem to be aware of his destiny as Christ, as in this double entendre exchange with Mrs. Spitunia (who has eyed him and made suggestive gestures during dinner).

“Jesse: I have to be going.

Mrs. S: Take me with you.

Jesse: I can't.

Mrs. S: Don't you love me?

Jesse: I don't even know you.”

(Mrs. S. grabs his genitals, leaving Jesse groaning.)

Jesse’s big moment is his chance to perform at Greaser’s Palace (following Cholera’s striptease). He hands out sheet music to the Palace musicians (a mariachi band which is kept in a cage when not performing). He begins a classic be-bop boogie woogie,

“I got the boogie on my fingers,
got the hubbahubba in my toes.
You hear me layin’ it down,
Oh baby, Jesse’s back in town.”

The sequence, including all of Jesse’s solo dance number, is mostly done as a medium shot with Jesse’s waist at the bottom of the frame. When his act doesn't succeed, he pulls off his gloves, showing his punctured and bloody hands, and screaming “Help me!” This business brings down the house, and a job offer from Greaser: “It’s the greatest thing I’ve ever seen. Let’s talk” But Jesse goes on, to a rendezvous with Cholera, and then with destiny in the form of his Father.

Even within the maze of farcical paradox, Downey uses the audience’s learned expectations for new twists. When Lamy returns from the dead for the last time (having been thrown in a well for dancing on the Palace stage to his father’s displeasure), he returns to the Palace with a large black dog. As Greaser goes charging out, we expect another dead Lamy, but instead Greaser gently urges his son to give the dog back to its owner. Father and son are reconciled, even dancing together, while Lamy adoringly repeats, “I love you, Dad.”

Downey is at his most effective in such moments of reversed expectations (whether those expectations come from his own plot, or from the conventional western). Again and again, Downey takes a stereotyped expectation and subverts it through changes in the form of its presentation, and thereby comically ruins its emotional and fantasy value. Even when he does not subvert expectations directly, he

effectively does subvert them through implications drawn from the film as a whole. For example, he presents us with the “pathetic fallacy” (that nature corresponds to human moods) in sentimentally romantic shots of birds in flight, a mare and colt running together in a field, the Edenic forest, and sunsets. These shots taken alone are clichés; within GREASER'S PALACE as a whole, they stand out as pathetically stupid.

GREASER'S PALACE is clearly a satire. Sometimes the film directly satirizes life, as with Vernon's banal male boasting or with the priest's response to Jesse's sermon about living together humanely:

“This is fine for, what you call, liberals; but tell us whether there is life after death or not.”

But for the most part the film satirizes art, especially the conventional western. The *Cahiers du cinéma* critics would argue that the conventional western itself is a part of the prevailing ideology, or a reflection of it, and therefore an attack on the western genre is apolitical criticism. However, even if one accepts in the abstract the argument that such a film is a political or ideological critique, it is difficult to see how such criticism can be really effective when displayed in a comic film such as GREASER'S PALACE. The farcical elements deflect the critical movement of satire, and in this case the critical mirror the satirist traditionally holds up to the audience is a funhouse distorting mirror. If the audience is mirrored, it is in an absurdity so complete that not much self-recognition can take place. GREASER'S PALACE does fit the *Cahiers du cinéma* argument in as much as the form does criticize the content. But we must also question a film that can only question and expose, no matter how effectively, but which cannot offer any solutions, directions, or programs for change, and ask if it really can challenge the prevailing ideology. Any film within the *Cahiers du cinéma* category, it would seem, can only make a negative criticism and never offer a positive challenge.

It should also be noted that the *Cahiers du cinéma* category has a certain abstractness and lack of historical or social content. Films, being concrete objects, exist socially and historically, and must be understood in that framework as well. In this context, it can be said that GREASER'S PALACE is an effective desanctification of both the form and content of the western, if not quite the total “deconstruction” of Godard-Gorin's WIND FROM THE EAST. GREASER'S PALACE is a mass film and falls between the unreflective farcical entertainment of CAT BALLOU and BLAZING SADDLES and the highly intellectual, tendentious political “western” of WIND FROM THE EAST. GREASER'S PALACE marks what is possible as a subversion of mainstream cinema while still within the commercial distribution system.

Notes:

[1.](#) Most important here are the examples of innovative filmmakers such as Jean-Marie Straub (see JUMP CUT 4), Jean-Luc Godard (JC 4 and 7) and Jean-Pierre Gorin (JC 3 and 4), and Jon Jost (JC 5). The roots of this controversy are found in avant-garde filmmaking and film theory. But the discussion has spread and the basic issues reappear in current rejections of Socialist Realism (such as Makavejev's WR), attempts to combine popular forms with explicit political content (Pontecorvo, Costa-Gavras, etc.), and various trends in Third World film.

[2.](#) The key statement here has been made by *Cahiers du cinéma*:

“There is another category [of films] in which the same double action [of attacking prevailing bourgeois ideology both politically and formally] operates, but ‘against the grain.’ The content is not explicitly political, but in some way becomes so through the criticism practiced on it through its form. To this category belong MEDITERRANEE, THE BELLBOY, PERSONA”

[Jean Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” tr. Susan Bennett, *Screen* 12:1 (Spring, 1971), p. 32. From *Cahiers du cinéma*, nos. 216, 217 (Oct.-Nov. 1969).]

This idea of subversive form can be found earlier in their justification for many Hollywood films which relied on the concept of the form (in the hands of an auteur-director) that criticized the manifest content (provided by studio writers). Douglas Sirk, for example, was seen as ironically undermining the sentimental romanticism of his scenarios by directing his films to bring out another meaning. British critics have argued this case for Sirk in *Screen* 12:2, Summer, 1971 (issue on Sirk), and Paul Willemen, continues the discussion in *Screen* 13:4, Winter, 1972-73.

[3.](#) Thomas Elsaesser, “Narrative Cinema and Audience-Oriented Aesthetics,” British Film Institute Educational Advisory Service/Society for Education in Film and Television Seminar paper (mimeo, 1973), p. 11.

[4.](#) Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1969), p. 21.